

FORMATION FOR GOD'S MISSION FROM THE MARGINS: An Anabaptist Perspective

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Introduction

In the post-Christian West, where believers of all denominations increasingly function at the margins of society, the witness of Anabaptists occasionally makes unexpected impact. The Amish, an Anabaptist group who avoid much modern technology, were improbable recipients of the 2006 "Most Inspiring Person of the Year" award on Beliefnet. The popular religious website described the response of the Amish to the October 2006 massacre of their children at Nickel Mines this way:

Incredibly, within hours of the shooting, members of the Amish community were reaching out to the killer's family, giving food and raising money for his wife and children. "We have to forgive," an Amish woman told Reuters. "We have to forgive him in order for God to forgive us." Another Amish man said of the family, "I hope they stay around here and they'll have a lot of friends and a lot of support."

Secular and religious media around the world commented positively on the Amish response to violence, sometimes contrasting it to the reaction of governments to terrorism. ABC's *Good Morning America* said the Amish "believe others will see a glimpse of Christ's love in their forgiveness."

The witness of the Amish raises questions of ecclesiology, mission and theological formation that take us back to the earliest days of the Christian era. "Not many of you were wise . . . not many were powerful," Paul wrote to Christians at Corinth, but "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise" (1 Cor. 1:26-27). The mission of God in the world, from the time of Abraham and Sarah, often has issued from the edges of history. Anabaptists—including Amish and Mennonites—represent one rivulet of the *missio Dei* that springs from apparent powerlessness to give sustained witness over centuries.

The Christian church as a whole has lost the political and social clout it wielded during the heyday of Christendom in the West. It may be useful for theological educators to look for inspiration to marginal mission movements such as medieval Franciscans, sixteenth-century Anabaptists, *comunidades de base* in Latin America—and above all to the early church. These share a theology of marginality that may open our eyes to see ways God is at work in the world today. These movements align with the *kenosis* theology of Paul's letter to the Philippians, which

presents a Trinitarian model of God's initiative: Although "in the form of God," Jesus "emptied himself" and became obedient to the point of political execution (Phil. 2:6-8). Christians who share "in the Spirit" (2:1) will have the "same mind" as Christ (2:5), and will "shine like stars in the world" (2:15).

Sixteenth-century Anabaptists sought to participate in the *missio Dei* by practicing discipleship with same mind as Christ. Hans Denck (1495-1527) declared, "No one can truly know Christ unless he follows him in life, and no one may follow him unless he has first known him." Centuries after they emerged as a distinctive group, the Amish of 2006 still had Christ-like reflexes in the face of extreme testing. An Amish school girl offered her own life to the gunman in hopes of saving a classmate, and her parents offered forgiveness to the family of the killer. What kind of spiritual formation and missiology empower such courageous witness?

Reformation Context of Anabaptist Mission

Sixteenth-century Anabaptists shared with Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and others a desire to reclaim the primacy of Scripture and the centrality of faith. But Anabaptists differed from Protestants and Catholics by insisting that the church, rather than the state, be final arbiter in matters of belief and practice. In contrast to territorial concepts of Christendom, in which all subjects of a given government belonged to the same church, Anabaptists believed God was creating a new, alternative community of allegiance to Jesus Christ. Sometimes called a "believer's church," members of this community received baptism (often re-baptism or "anabaptism") upon confession of faith.

Grounded in Trinitarian theology, Anabaptists saw the non-coercive love of Christ as God's *modus operandi* for redemption of the world: "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself . . . and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ . . ." (2 Cor. 5:19-20). Mennonites developed particular ideals, each of which is shared by parts of the larger Christian church. Though actual practice often falls short of professed conviction, Mennonites believe:

1. Church should be a voluntary community of persons who experience new birth in Christ, receive baptism, and live in accountability to the Spirit and one another.
2. Scripture, interpreted by the faith community in light of the teaching and example of Jesus, is the rule for faith and practice.
3. Believers seek to follow Jesus even in difficult areas such as economic justice, love of enemies, chastity, truth-telling, and exercise of power.

4. Christians give allegiance to Jesus and the body of Christ above all loyalties to nation, ethnic group, family, or social class.
5. Believers are citizens of the Reign of God, a future manifestation of global redemption that already is breaking into the present among those who call Jesus Lord.
6. All members of the church, in their diverse occupations and stations in life, are called to witness to the gospel and lay down their lives if necessary.

Grassroots Mission

Anabaptists differed radically from their Catholic and Protestant contemporaries in their understanding of how God is at work to redeem the world. The latter expected God to transform society through a “top-down” magisterial system of church and government working in tandem. Anabaptists were not anarchists, but they rejected the notion that the state is an appropriate partner in mission. Use of the sword or any form of coercion to advance the church seemed incongruous to them. Anabaptists believed God would transform society “from the bottom up,” as men and women individually experienced the grace of God and committed themselves to communities of Christ’s disciples.

God used Anabaptists in a grass-roots mission movement on their own continent, and the Great Commission (Matt. 28:20) was their most frequently cited Bible verse. At a secret 1528 gathering in Augsburg, Germany, Anabaptists apparently assigned each participant to work in a different part of Europe. So many leaders died in this mission that the Augsburg meeting later was called the “Martyrs’ Synod.” New emissaries picked up the agenda when the first ones perished. One Dutch Anabaptist named Leenaert Bouwens (1515-1582) baptized more than ten thousand converts in Germany, France, and Poland.

The fire that swept Anabaptism across Europe was fueled in part by larger trends in society. In some countries there was widespread resentment against the wealth of the church, the burden of ecclesiastical tithes, and the power of landholding elites. Early Anabaptist mission emerged in the context of deeply felt social, political and economic needs in wider society. Simultaneous to the appearance of Anabaptism in 1525 was the Peasants’ Revolt in Germany, and a few Anabaptists themselves turned violent. But the largest and most enduring strains of Anabaptism (Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish) adopted a peaceful witness, living as a community of alternative allegiance to Jesus.

Loss of Mission Impulse

The initial Anabaptist/Mennonite mission impulse largely disappeared within a century. The witness of Mennonites in their native lands got silenced after 1590 in two ways:¹

- In central Europe, Mennonites (and later the Amish, who split from the Swiss Mennonites in 1693) withdrew into cultural and religious enclaves where the emphasis was more on preservation than on mission.
- In northern Europe, Mennonites became prosperous and joined the cultural mainstream. One prominent Mennonite leader, for example, was sufficiently cultured and wealthy to have his portrait painted by Rembrandt.

Both trajectories likely were responses to the discomfort of being marginalized misfits.

Persecution and social contempt induced one group to withdraw and become the “silent in the land.” The same realities (or memories of them) made acculturation and accommodation irresistible to a second group.

Reawakening of Mission Impulse

European Mennonites who began to arrive in North America in 1683 largely functioned as enclaves rather than missionary communities. But two factors eventually began to reawakened mission interest among North American Mennonites:

1. Ecumenical interaction with evangelicals. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, evangelical influences from the wider Christian church inspired mission interest among Mennonites. These influences included, among others, D. L. Moody and the Student Volunteer Movement. Mennonites took up vigorous witness overseas, and planted churches beyond their own ethnic enclaves in North America. The global mission movement bore fruit: the median Mennonite in the world today is a black African woman. Similarly, twentieth-century church planting in North America, inspired by wider evangelical influences, left a legacy of burgeoning Hispanic, African-American and other Mennonite “racial-ethnic” congregations.

2. Recovery of the “Anabaptist Vision.” In 1944, Mennonite historian and churchman H. S. Bender published his classic “Anabaptist Vision” paper (after presenting it to the American Society of Church History, of which he was chair).² Bender summarized the essence of Anabaptist understandings as a) discipleship to Jesus Christ, b) participation in voluntary faith

¹ Wilbert Shenk, *By Faith They Went Out: Mennonite Missions 1850-1999*. Elkart: Institute of Mennoties Studies, 2000, 29.

² Harold S. Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision.” *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, April 1944, 67-88.

community, and c) commitment to nonviolent love. In 1973, Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder published his seminal book, *The Politics of Jesus*.³ Both authors impressed Mennonites and others with communal, political, and ethical dimensions of the gospel. Mennonites with higher education particularly embraced Yoder's work, perhaps in part because his economic and political application of the gospel resonated with social activist or anti-war ferment in the secular academy.

A Bifurcation of Mission

The way Mennonite intellectuals *appropriated* Bender and Yoder tended to accent political and activist mission over personal and evangelical dimensions. Even as our mission agencies reached a peak of staffing and resources in the 1970s and 80s, some Mennonites were shifting away from evangelical dimensions of witness. Increasing numbers were satisfied to pour resources into an ambitious global presence of service projects in education, economic development, conflict transformation and health care. A bifurcated view of mission emerged:

- One part of the church is drawn to an individual conversionist model of evangelism that has much in common with mainstream Evangelicalism. Evangelicals in North America tend to identify with the political Right and downplay the way the gospel addresses systemic evils of war, poverty and racism.
- Another part of the church is drawn to peace and justice activism that generally is at home with the political Left. This approach to witness owes much to conflict transformation and other social agenda in which confession of Jesus as the way to God sometimes is viewed as exclusive or arrogant in a multi-religious world.

Bifurcation of mission may spring from a Christomonism to which Mennonites are susceptible: putting the accent on Jesus without giving adequate attention to Trinitarian theology. If we highlight Jesus alone, we may be tempted to think of him as mere model of nonviolence or hero of the dispossessed. A "moral influence" theology of atonement usually accompanies such a low Christology. This rightly seems inadequate to other Mennonites, who turn instead to Evangelical theologies that emphasize the divinity of Christ and individual salvation—but often fail to address structural evil in society. Mennonites need a Trinitarian missiology in which the Spirit empowers believers who are forgiven through the cross to live out the radical ethic of Jesus, God-with-us.

³ John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

“City Set on a Hill” Evangelism

Despite some vigorous mission beyond our own communities, Mennonites in North America largely functioned for the past three centuries as a “city set on a hill.” We do relief and service projects, and aspire to live as Sermon on the Mount communities in contrast to the violence, greed and individualism of the world. But we do not readily speak the gospel.

The Amish may be able to survive and grow as an enclave by maintaining a high birth rate and keeping boundaries such as distinctive dress, no electricity, little formal education, and marriage within the church. Mennonites, in contrast, have largely abandoned distinctive dress and tightly-regulated congregations. We now have smaller families. We are mobile, educated, professional, and sometimes wealthy. Our future as a church, and the long-term viability of our witness in the world, will depend upon a re-uniting of the evangelical and activist impulses that divided us in the past century.

The bifurcation of mission experienced by Mennonites has parallels in the wider Christian church, and the challenge that presents for theological education is ecumenical. Individualized evangelicalism too easily accommodates *status quo* nationalism, consumerism, and violent solutions to social and political problems. Peace and justice activism separated from the cross and resurrection of Jesus too easily becomes anthropocentric idealism and mere social program. If the two streams of mission—evangelical and activist—were to flow together with Trinitarian understanding, God may create from them a mighty river of life for the healing of the nations.

New Jerusalem as Paradigm of Mission

Theological education should prepare a people for citizenship and service in the New Jerusalem, the global community of alternative allegiance that John saw coming down out of heaven (Revelation 21, 22).⁴ The city is *God’s* initiative, an answer to Jesus’ prayer, “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” It is rooted in salvation history, with names of the tribes of Israel on its gates and names of the apostles on the foundations.

The city is big enough (12,000 *stadia*) to encompass the core of the Roman Empire as John knew it. The New Jerusalem is an alternative reign that is superimposed upon, but distinct from, the empire. The Lamb—rather than the emperor—is at the center, showing us the

⁴ J. Nelson Kraybill, “New Jerusalem as Paradigm for Mission,” *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 2 (1994), 123-132.

vulnerable and powerless way God engages the world. The New Jerusalem is open, with gates never closed. Divine water of life flows out from the city, and leaves of its tree are for the healing of the nations. Revelation ends with invitation: “Let everyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift” (22:17). Although complete fulfillment of the New Jerusalem vision remains in the future, the city already is taking shape in proleptic ways among people who confess Jesus as Lord.

Implications for Missional Theological Education

John’s vision suggests that the church is a community of alternative allegiance that attracts a watching world by entering into God’s mission of reconciliation begun in Christ. *Theological education for an ecclesiology of mission will offer citizenship lessons and ambassadorial training for those who belong to the New Jerusalem.* The following are themes and expressions such education might include:

1. **Allegiance-shaping worship that defines citizenship.** Western society swamps us with rituals and symbols of allegiance to country and socio-economic class. As was true for the early church, worship of a triune God needs to be so central to our individual and corporate lives that it displaces liturgies and loyalties of a pagan empire. Mennonites historically have been wary of liturgy in worship, but now liturgy may be essential to confess faith in God, reinforce allegiance to Jesus, and inspire commitment to the way of the cross. Hymnody is the closest thing Mennonites have had to liturgy, and we need hymns that as a *corpus* bring together evangelical and activist understandings of witness. Mennonites need to train pastors who not only teach ethical ideals and theological abstracts, but also point others to living encounter with the risen Lord.

2. **Mission understood as reconciliation.** “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us . . .” (2 Cor. 5:19). Paul’s vision of the *missio Dei* as reconciliation provides the best common ground for bridging the evangelical-activist divide in the Mennonite Church of North America. Theological education can foster a comprehensive view of mission that embraces both forgiveness of sins (reconciliation with God) and a restored creation (reconciliation between peoples and with

creation itself). We need to recover a vibrant eschatology that places our hope for redemption of the world in God's promise of a New Creation—not in the effectiveness of our own programs.

3. **Focus on Jesus as model of grace-filled mission.** In the fourth Gospel, we see Jesus giving bread to the hungry, but refusing to assume political office (John 6:1-15). He went on to give spiritual food by offering himself as “bread from heaven” (6:25-59). The offering of literal food made Jesus popular, and relief and service projects may do the same for us today. But when Jesus himself became the “bread of life” offering, the result was scandal (6:60-71). Yet it is only through the offering of Jesus himself that we experience forgiveness and grace that allow us to live joyfully—including when we fail to measure up to the demanding ethic of the gospel.

4. **Mission in suffering.** It is ironic that North American Mennonites, with our large collection of Anabaptist martyr stories, now mostly live “at ease in Zion.” Wealth and social acceptance breed lethargy for mission; suffering can be a catalyst for witness. Our family systems still have living memory of great suffering in Russia or Guatemala, and a new generation needs to hear such stories. Anabaptists in Vietnam, Zimbabwe and elsewhere endure persecution today. Some inner city congregations in North America face epic struggles with poverty, street violence, and racism. Interaction with such places of suffering may put Mennonites in touch with the roots of mission both in the early church and in later renewal movements such as Anabaptism.

5. **“Bilingual” education.** How do we make truth claims about Jesus in a multi-religious world? Leslie Newbigin and others launched a movement in the past generation to recover Christian witness in the public square. Literature and examples from this and similar movements need to be featured throughout a seminary curriculum. Mennonite ethicist Ted Koontz suggests that the “first language” of Christians is the idiom of faith: cross, resurrection, discipleship to Jesus Christ. But we also must learn a “second language” of a world around us that does not know Christ.⁵ Theological education needs to prepare leaders to be conversant in the idiom of the world (science, sociology, psychology . . .), but to be grounded first of all in the language of a faith that expects God to change lives and turn the tide of history.

⁵ Ted Koontz, “Thinking Theologically About War Against Iraq.” *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, January 2003, 93-108.



6. Celebration of heroes, stories and role models. Retelling faith stories of forebears can deeply shape identity. The Amish routinely sing hymns (ballads) about the witness of sixteenth-century martyrs. The image on this page made a deep impression on me as a child: it is a seventeenth-century engraving of Anabaptist Dirk Willems rescuing a government officer who was pursuing him. Willems had safely crossed

thin ice after escaping from prison in Holland in 1569, but the officer pursuing him fell through into the water. Willems turned back, saved the man's life, was re-arrested, and soon was burned at the stake.⁶

Seminary students need regular exposure heroes of witness today: inner city pastors, cross-cultural missionaries, courageous peacemakers, and effective leaders in congregational evangelism. Good narratives and inspiring role models “re-wire” us for radical behavior—whether it be the Amish who forgive, or members of our congregations who tell others about Jesus when opportunity arises.

7. Hiring of faculty who think missionally. The ability to think missionally increasingly needs to be a requirement for teaching in all disciplines. We must not ghettoize missiology into one department. Not all faculty will have served in cross-cultural settings, but all at least need positive exposure to places where mission is evident. This could happen through short-term mission assignments, through outreach with their home congregation, or through sabbatical travel.

8. Engagement of ethnic minorities and parts of the global church where vigorous mission is happening. Through travel, reading, faculty exchange, and international students, seminary communities can learn from other parts of the world where mission is percolating. Mennonites might pay particular attention to countries such as Korea, England or Colombia, where the sixteenth-century Anabaptist model of church renewal inspires growth and life. We can learn

⁶ Thieleman J. van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror* [1660]. Scottdale: Herald Press, 1950, 741-42.

from Argentina and Ethiopia, where the Mennonite Church is growing through church planting and evangelism.

9. **New delivery systems.** Mennonite graduate schools struggle to serve black, Hispanic and other minority peoples in our denomination, in part because educational needs in those communities often are at an undergraduate level. Many ethnic minority pastors are bi-vocational, making it difficult for them to relocate for seminary study. This means that our seminary campuses largely are not in fruitful dialogue with parts of the North American church where mission and evangelism are most vibrant. Seminaries need to develop new delivery systems for theological education, and non-degree or undergraduate-level programs that match the needs of minorities. All students need contact with missional ferment happening at ethnic and geographic edges of the church.

10. **Integration of seminary education with local mission and ministry.** Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary is situated in the midst of a low-income population that often experiences violence and social dysfunction. God is at work in these neighborhoods around us, but we mostly theologize without being aware of it. We need ways to bring the neighborhood into the classroom, and to get students out to see what God is doing nearby.

Trinitarian Moorings for Mission from the Margins

Mennonites need to recover a Trinitarian missiology that responds to God the Father (who creates and judges), God the Son (who disarms the powers and shows us how to live) and God the Spirit (who transforms and enables). The dynamic interrelationship within the Trinity suggests a model for missional formation: God the creator becomes vulnerable in love through Jesus to the point of death, at which time the Spirit brings new life that redeems the world. A deep experience of God as three-in-one will bridge the bifurcation of mission in the Mennonite Church.

Trinitarian formation for mission from the margins will strip faculty and students of the pretense that we can solve the world's problems or even design effective mission ourselves. We will give as much attention to helping students know God and recognize divine activity as we will to imparting skills or knowledge for leadership. As God shapes our seminaries and churches into distinctive, Christ-like communities, we will not be satisfied to function as enclaves. Every

awareness of God's redemptive activity in the world will draw us out to become part of a river of life that will bring healing to the nations.

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